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**Cathedral Mountains 2001**

Mount Beckey and the high glacier basin



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## Cathedral Mountains 2001

### PERSONNEL

Brian Davison  
Lindsay Griffin  
Geoff Hornby  
Dave Wallis

### SUMMARY

From the 28 June to 18 July British climbers, Brian Davison, Lindsay Griffin, Geoff Hornby and Dave Wallis, visited the Cathedral Mountains, a small offshoot of mountains to the west of Mount Russell. Heart Mountain is the main peak named on maps of the area. The peaks are bordered by Cathedral Creek to the west and it must be wondered if they were the original Cathedral Spires (the name now given to the Kichatna Spires).

From a gravel airstrip and hunting lodge established by Clark Engle in the 1960's. A track led approximately five miles to an old trespass mine by the edge of Boulder Creek about two miles north of the snout of the main glacier in the range. This was used as a base by the team.

The team made a total of 18 probable first ascents, including 15 of previously unclimbed peaks. Using the trespass mine as an advance base Heart Mountain and Pt. 6765 further along the ridge to its south east were climbed from the col between. In a single 14 hour push the NW Gully of Heart Mountain was climbed and the ridge traversed first south east then south for approximately three miles to Pt. 7880, taking in a total of eight summits. Pt. 6805, which overlooks the Purkypile Mine to the north (marked on the map), was climbed from a snow basin to the east.

From a glacier camp about two miles up the main Boulder Glacier, Pts. 7900 and 7600 on the south bank of the glacier were climbed.

The highest mountain of the region and the only one known to have had an ascent, Pt. 8500, was climbed via a south east facing gully and the line of the original ascent, the north west ridge, descended to a col connecting the head of Cathedral Glacier with a high glacier basin on the north side of the mountain. From here Pt. 7825 and two other peaks, 7800 and 7700, were gained by traversing a snow and rock ridge west. Despite a height of 7825 awarded to the most northerly of these three peaks the middle one appeared to be the highest. The ridge was reversed then followed to its eastern end and the summit of Pt. 7900. A snow gully allowed a descent to the high glacier basin, which was crossed and the camp on Boulder Glacier gained. These peaks were climbed in a single eight hour push. The 1000ft south facing rock pillar below the summit of Pt. 8500 was climbed and the snow/rock ridge above followed to the summit for the third ascent of the peak.

For much of the time cloud developed in the afternoon and led to light rain or snow, which sometimes became heavy. Temperatures were far from extreme, usually hovering close to zero. This meant good snow conditions never really occurred.

### THE ASCENTS

The Expedition made 18 probable first ascents. Apart from the highest peak 8500, the summits were previously virgin, though as hunters and prospectors have been, and in some cases still are, active in the area, and Heart Mountain has been named, it is possible some of the peaks may have seen previous unrecorded ascents. All names are provisional and all altitudes very approximate:

Heart Mountain via the South East Ridge from the col. Also via the NW gully, the start of a traverse of the ridge.

Pt. 6765 via the west ridge from the col between it and Heart Mountain. This was climbed twice. The second time the ridge was continued southwards over three crumbling rocky summits, Pt. 6700, 6700, 7000 to reach Pt. 7236

Pt. 7236 traversed via the north ridge and down the south ridge to a col.

Pt. 7400 Via a north to south traverse, reached from the previous col.

Pt. 7880 The final peak on the north-south traverse was climbed via the north ridge, which was then reversed to the col between this peak and 7400. NNW facing snow slopes were descended to a small glacier flowing into the main Boulder Glacier.

Pt. 6805 via the north east face from a snow basin.

Pt. 7900 at the head of the Boulder Glacier. Ascent and descent via its north ridge

Pt. 7600 located on the ridge on the south side of Boulder Glacier mid way between Pts. 7900 and 7880. Ascent and descent from the glacier via a rock buttress, north spur to north east ridge. We named this Mount Alyssa.

Pt. 8500 via the right fork of a broad south east facing snow gully just to the right of the prominent rock pillar. This led to the upper east ridge, which was followed to the summit. Descent was via the original north west ridge. Adhering to the crest and crossing a small point (7700) just before the glaciated col at the head of Cathedral Glacier. The 1000ft rock pillar and 500ft snow/rock ridge (TDsup) was climbed a few days later and the gully descended on that occasion.

Pts. 7825, 7800 and 7700 after a long traverse of the east ridge from the high glacier basin. The ridge between 7800 and 7700 was intricate and the east ridge was reversed to the glacier basin. Pt. 7800, the middle peak, was thought to be the highest.

Pt. 7900 via its west ridge and descent of a south facing snow gully to the high glacier basin. The basin was crossed and the camp on Boulder Glacier reached after crossing the lower east ridge of Pt. 8500.

All these climbs were made from the Trespass Mine at approximately 3300ft or from the camp on Boulder Glacier at 6200ft.

### **CATHEDRAL MOUNTAINS**

The Cathedral Mountains are a small isolated circle of mountains to the west of the main range, west of Mount Russell. The highest summit, Pt. 8500ft, christened Mount Beckey by its first ascensionists, sits in the centre with smaller 6-7000ft summits radiating outwards. A hunting lodge (The Grandview) and gravel airstrip developed by Clark Engle about five miles to the north west gives access. Old mine roads help in the approach to both the Boulder and Cathedral Glaciers. Mount Beckey has a fine granite wall on its south east side and the south side of Cathedral Glacier seemed to possess several such exciting looking walls, which were glimpsed through gaps in the cloud.

The Purkypile Mine, marked on the map, was the original mine in the area. The buildings blew away in a storm in the mid 1990s and all that is now left are a few rotting timbers and rusting barrels. To the east of this is an illegal trespass mine which appeared to have stopped working in the mid 1970's, though the small main building is still intact. A track leads from the south end of the airstrip through the forest and mosquitoes and to the trespass mine. This was by far the better path. The route to the Purkypile Mine branched off this track once clear of the forest. The airstrip is still used by a hunting guide, Michael Litzen, who operates a guided hunting service from it during August and September every year. He called in several times during our visit, though we only saw him on two occasions.

The first and only recorded climbing in the area took place in June 1996. Approaching via the Cathedral Glacier to the south west Fred Beckey, John Middendorf and Calvin Hebert climbed the highest peak, 8500ft, Mount Beckey via its north west ridge from the col at the head of the glacier. The group climbed the mountain in cloud and snow showers. They also spent some considerable time carrying loads from their airdrop on the Cathedral Glacier back to the airstrip. In poor weather this was all that was attempted and the rock walls of Cathedral Glacier were left, and indeed still remain, untouched.

### **ITINERARY**

Flight Manchester - Atlanta - Anchorage with Delta, the return flight also involved a change in Seattle.

Dates:

25 June Hornby and Davison fly from Manchester. Wallis travels from Seattle to Talkeetna. Griffin, already at Talkeetna after his first Alaskan trip of the year, does his washing and has a cup of tea.

26 June Davison and Hornby arrive in Anchorage just after midnight and find a hotel. In the morning they get the expedition food at Carrs Supermarket. Afternoon shuttlebus to Talkeetna and meet up with Wallis and Griffin at the offices of Talkeetna Air Taxi (TAT).

27 June Pack food and equipment, and check weight for flight. Arrange flights with TAT and celebrate Wallis's birthday.

28 June Wallis and Davison on the 7:30 flight to the hunting lodge airstrip. Upon arrival they are attacked by mosquitoes but escape to the relative comfort of the hunting lodge's meat locker. Griffin and Hornby arrive with the second 185 flight. The weather is excellent. Providing probably the best day throughout their entire stay. The track from the airstrip to the mine is found and followed with loads of food and gear. The main track is followed, which leads to the trespass mine after approximately five miles. Loads are dropped there.

29 June Everyone moves up to the mine with more food and gear. Clouds build up in the afternoon.

30 June In cloudy conditions Griffin explores along the ridge to the west and Little Mountain above the Purkypile Mine, while Davison looks for a river crossing of Boulder Creek. After ascending a scree slope to a col, he climbs Pt. 6765 and Heart Mountain in cloud. Descent from Heart Mountain is via a different gully.

1 July A 1am start for the attractive NW facing gully on Pt. 7825, which is visible from the airstrip. Clouds of mosquitoes, then very wet snow, force this idea to be abandoned and the north east face of Pt. 6805 is climbed instead.

2 July An afternoon start to try and traverse as much as possible of the ridge from Heart Mountain to Pt. 7880. Wallis, Davison and Hornby cross the creek and ascend the North West snow gully to the summit of Heart Mountain. Griffin, unable to make the crossing, slogs up the scree slope to the col and up Heart Mountain. Older and wiser, Griffin and Hornby abandon the traverse at the col and descend the scree slope to the mine and more tea. Davison and Wallis continue over several summits on poor rock with cloud building from the south. A recurring knee problem prevents Wallis climbing the finally snowy summit of Pt. 7880. He waits while Davison climbs this and returns to the col. Decent to the Boulder Glacier and depot of the gear sees a 2am return to the mine camp; a 14 hour trip.

3 July Everyone descends to the lodge for more provisions, which have been cached in the meat locker. Griffin, Wallis and Hornby descend the normal track while Davison crosses over the top to the Purkypile Mine in order to find where its track joins the other one. An overcast day with rain in the late afternoon.

4 July A wet day so everyone stays at the lodge eating and drinking tea.

5 July Wetter still so more tea drinking.

6 July Heavier rain still so more eating and tea drinking.

7 July The weather starts to improve in the afternoon and Michael Litzen, a hunting guide, flies in to depot some provisions at his hut. A final large meal and some tea in anticipation of tomorrow's activity.

8 July Walk to the Trespass Mine with more food and gear. Griffin and Hornby take some supplies to the snout of the glacier and return for tea.

9 July Walk up to the high glacier cache of gear left by Wallis and Davison and camp on a large flat boulder.

10 July Leave camp at 2am. Everyone walks to the head of the glacier. The north ridge of Pt. 7900 is climbed and descended in poor snow conditions. Wallis's knee gives him further pain. The wind starts to rise as we return to camp and continues all day and night making it difficult to brew the tea.



Boulder Camp on the glacier

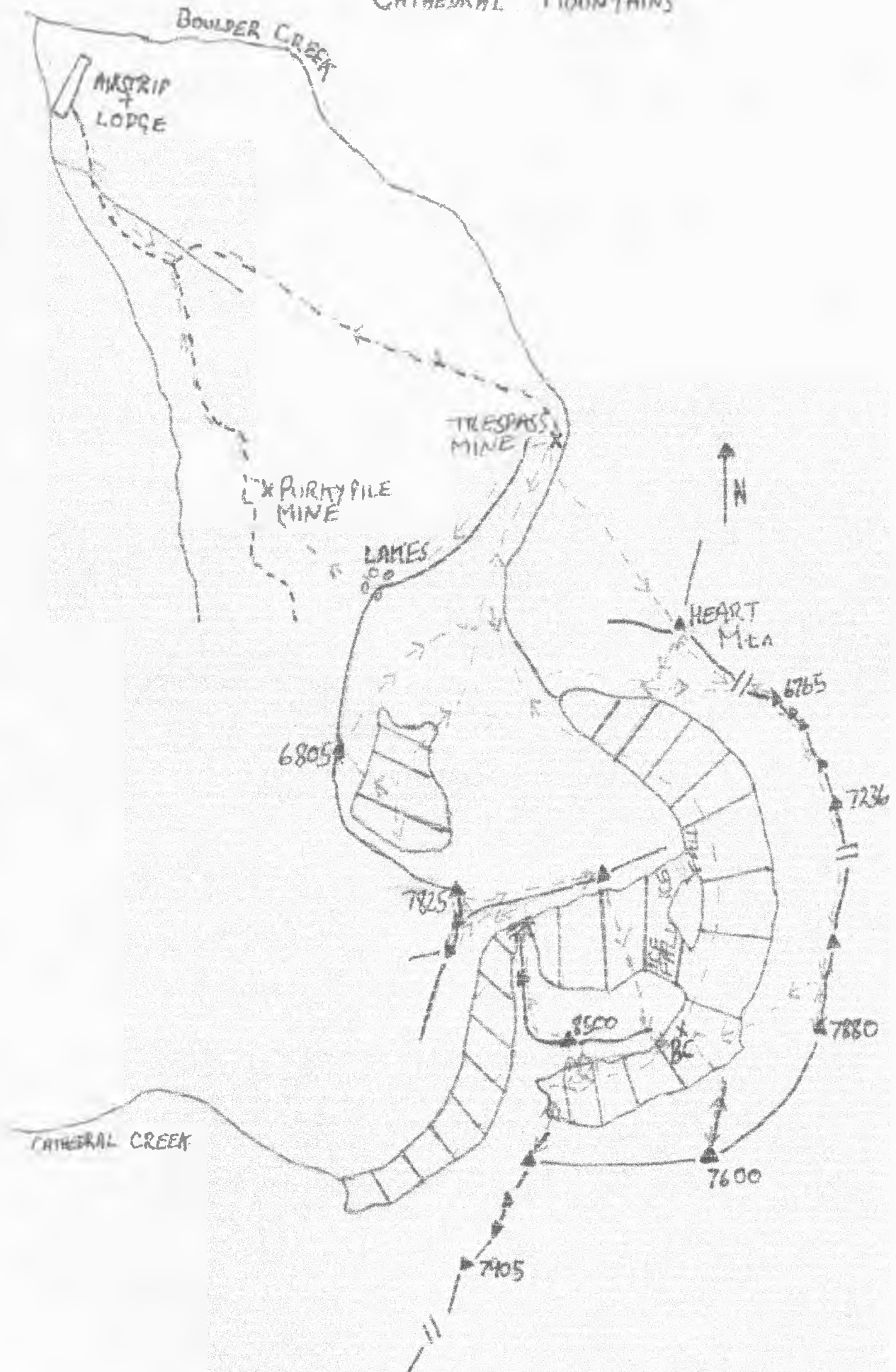
11 July Winds die down in the early afternoon. Wallis and Hornby descend to the glacier snout for more provisions and books about Heinz Zak. Davison climbs Pt. 7600 on the south side of the glacier opposite the camp, named by us Mount Alyssa. Appalling but reliable snow conditions.

12 July A good start to the day. Hornby is up and away at 6am following yesterday's tracks up Pt. 7600. Davison leaves camp at 11am in increasing cloud and climbs Pt. 8500, the highest peak, via the right fork of a south east facing gully to the right of a large rock pillar. The summit ridge is gained and followed to the top in complete cloud. A small cairn from the first ascent is found. A gap in the clouds encourages a descent of the north west ridge, the original ascent route. Keeping to the ridge, a rock peaklet, 7700 ft, is crossed and the glaciated col at the head of the Cathedral Glacier is gained. This is crossed to the ridge on the far side. This snow/rock ridge is traversed west to Pts. 7825, 7800 and 7700 before being reversed and continued east to Pt. 7900 at its other end. A south facing snow gully is descended to the high glaciated basin, which is crossed to the ridge running east from Pt. 8500. This is crossed and a gully descended to the glacier camp in an eight hour round trip.

Friday 13 July A bad luck day, it snowed. Everyone stayed in camp and ate as much as possible and drank lots of tea in anticipation of descending to the mine the following day.

14 July Reasonable weather encourages Hornby to descend to the lodge, not feeling too well after so much tea. Griffin goes up the glacier to tackle a slabby gully line to the left of the rock pillar on Pt. 8500. Davison and Wallis try the large central corner fault line up the pillar. Numerous avalanches deter Griffin and snow on the early pitches stop Davison on some friction moves. Griffin descends to the mine, his gully line later avalanches. The day

# CATHEDRAL MOUNTAINS



improves and Davison and Wallis do 13 rock pitches (approximately 1000ft), then 500ft of snow and rock ridge to the summit in 9 hours, TDsup, the third ascent of Mount Beckey. They descend via the south east gully.

15 July Hornby returns to the trespass mine for another load and descends to the airstrip with Griffin for some more tea. Davison and Wallis descend the glacier to the mine and clear out everything before descending to the lodge.

16 July Everyone packs up ready for the pickup. Low cloud and rain prevent flying.

17 July Lower cloud and heavier rain. Still no plane, running low on tea.

18 July Blue skies and a visit from Mike the hunter, who loans us his satellite phone to inform TAT the weather is good but deteriorating from the south. Paul Roderick arrives in the Beaver about four hours later. Return to Talkeetna, a rapid repack and shower before the shuttle bus arrives to take us to Anchorage for our midnight flights. Dave Wallis leaves the next day.

19 July Flight.

20 July Arrive in Manchester with our baggage.

### **TRANSPORT**

#### **Long Haul Flight**

We flew with Delta Airlines via Atlanta. No real complaints other than delays in Atlanta. The transatlantic flight offers a two-piece baggage allowance, with each bag a maximum of 66lbs, making it possible to take out from the UK any extra delicacies required.

#### **Anchorage Accommodation**

The small and rather more personable Spenard Hostel offers cheap and quiet accommodation close to the airport. It has a kitchen, laundry facilities and a pleasant garden at a cost of \$12 per night/person.

SPENARD HOSTEL  
2845 WEST 42<sup>ND</sup> PLACE  
TEL: 248 5036

#### **Talkeetna Shuttle**

The easiest and most efficient means of transporting oneself and hundreds of kilos of food and equipment from Anchorage airport to Talkeetna is to take a shuttle service. Having used Talkeetna Shuttle on a previous occasion, we again chose this company. It provides an excellent service, meeting planes by arrangement. It was taken over (2001) by Stephany Thompson who seems to be continuing the excellent service. Bookings can be made in advance by phone, fax or email. Cost was \$90 each for a return journey.

Talkeetna Shuttle Service  
PO Box 468  
Talkeetna, AK 99676  
TOLL FREE IN THE US: 1-888-288-6008  
DIRECT PHONE: 907-733-1725  
FAX: 907-733-222  
Email: STEPHY-T@WORLDNET.ATT.NET  
tshuttle@alaska.net  
Web site: <http://www.alaska.net/~tshuttle>

#### **Glacier Flight**

Paul Roderick's TAT (Talkeetna Air Taxi) is now the company chosen by nearly all climbers. In fact, it may be the only choice if you wish to visit a non-standard area.

Paul, who is also a climber and skier, is widely thought to be one of the best glacier pilots in the region and will get you into places where many other pilots can't or won't land. Weather permitting, he will also make regular detours from the normal Denali run, flying past your base camp to check for emergencies. TAT also have bunkhouse accommodation for climbers waiting for a flight in to the glacier or shuttle out of Talkeetna.

Talkeetna Air Taxi - TAT  
PO Box 73  
Talkeetna, Alaska 99676  
TEL: 907-733-2218  
Toll free US only 800-533-2219

FAX: 907-733-1434  
info@talkeetnaair.com  
http://www.talkeetnaair.com

The hunting guide, who regularly uses the airstrip at the Cathedral Mountains and had a good knowledge of the area, was:

Michael Litzen  
HC01 Box 1130  
Kenai, AK 99611  
TEL 907-776-5868  
FAX: 907-776-8707

### **MAPS**

For an overview of the southern part of the Central Alaska Range from Foraker in the north to well south of the Kichatna Mountains and Willow region the United States Department of the Interior Geological Survey produces 'Talkeetna' in the Alaska Topographic Series at a scale of 1:250,000. The Cathedral Mountains lay on the Talkeetna D5 Map in the USGS series at a scale of 1:63,360 (or an inch to a mile for those who have not lost touch with imperial measurements).

### **EQUIPMENT**

Anchorage is the best spot to buy any necessary equipment. REI on Northern Lights (almost next door to Carrs) has a huge selection, while only 100 yards away, at 2633 Spenard Road, Alaska Mountaineering is smaller but still quite comprehensive. Talkeetna has two small climbing shops, one either side of the main road near the Fairview Inn.

TAT also provides plastic sledges and wands, and you can hire snow shoes, snow saws, shovels etc. The plastic sledges are very useful for seats around base camp and as receptacles for melting snow in the sun (don't forget the black plastic bin-liners) but for towing gear across anything other than a clean flat glacier, forget it. Plastic barrels are very useful for gear storage outside the tent and for protecting food if neurotic about possible bear attack.

### **FUEL**

We took three US gallons of Coleman Fuel. Most of the cooking was done on a simple petrol stove from Optimus and an MSR. The latter was fine for heating water to a certain temperature but generally failed to get it to boiling point. As we were not melting snow, we only used one gallon of fuel and about six gaz canisters; 70/30 Butane/Propane mix, which were used for cooking while at the airstrip.

### **ENVIRONMENTAL CONCERNS**

The area, although pristine in recent times, did bare the scars of its mining past with numerous rusting barrels and machine parts in the region close to the mines. Packaging was burned. Metal and plastic rubbish came out with us on the flight and was doomed to the land-fill in Talkeetna. Unfortunately, there does not appear to be any special facility in place for used batteries, which were brought back to the UK.

### **WEATHER AND CONDITIONS**

At our lowly altitude and distance from the biggest peaks in the Central Alaska Range we never experienced excessive serious storms though a 36 hour period of strong winds buffeting the camp on Boulder Glacier causing some tent damage.

In general, temperatures were a few degrees either side of zero which unfortunately meant that crisp hard snow conditions were never really found. Normally cloud would develop during the afternoon, which often led to minor rain or snow. We were at the airstrip re-supplying with food during the most significant and prolonged period of bad weather, which lasted about five days. The snow deposited did cause some small avalanches but nothing serious. The wet snow, cloud, poor visibility and rain made conditions very akin to those in Scotland, which suited the author fine.

According to local people it was one of the wettest Julys for sometime, in contrast to the unusually fine weather in June.



## **COMMUNICATIONS**

Radios are not compulsory and parties may wish to chose complete autonomy and total commitment by not taking one. Indeed on this trip we had little choice as the radios work on line of sight and as we were west of the main range, there was no one to see us. Before departure various options were investigated. A more powerful radio set would require an operating license and be heavy, and while a satellite phone seemed a good option, we were unable to obtain one at a reasonable price. Local activists in the Central Alaska range suggested that mobile phones often worked from passes and summits. We took a triband mobile phone but this failed to pick up a signal even in Anchorage airport. A mobile phone was hired in Anchorage from:

Summit Cellular & Paging  
403 West Northern Lights Blvd  
Anchorage, AK 99503  
TEL: 907-227-9997  
FAX: 907-227-9993

This was religiously carried to many of the summits and the switching on ceremony conducted but we were never graced with a signal. The hunting guide Michael Litzen kindly loaned us his satellite phone while at the airstrip to contact TAT for our pickup. However, we did take an EPIRB (Emergency Satellite Beacon, hired from TAT) which could be activated in the case of a real emergency.

A short wave radio was used to keep in contact with the outside world. Although few local stations to the east such as Talkeetna or Anchorage were picked up, we did receive broadcasts from further to the west including radio Australia, much to the pleasure of our resident Aussie, Dave Wallis.

## **MEDICAL**

Although these mountains of circa 2500m may present a number of dangers, altitude sickness is not one of them. With approach by aircraft through the hygienically sterile USA the familiar Himalayan gut problems associated with dirty water and contaminated food were not encountered. Our camps at the hunting lodge and mine had a plentiful supply of fresh water, as did the camp on the glacier at about 2000m. This was also sufficiently high to prevent problems from mosquitoes. Insect repellent and a bug net for the head were essential to prevent insanity from the constant pestering of mosquitoes. Numerous bear and wolf tracks were observed particularly in the forested area but none of these animals was sighted. A large herd of Dall sheep was spotted standing on a snow patch below Heart Mountain, possibly trying to avoid the mosquitoes.

None of the team was medically qualified but all had medical first aid training or personnel experience in medical emergencies. The main first aid supply was left at base camp with members carrying a small supply of pain killers, bandages, padding and elastoplasts for use on the hill.

Aspirin and paracetamol were brought as moderate pain killers with a small supply of Temgesic as a major painkiller. Ibuprofen was available as an anti-inflammatory. This was popular with Wallis who had a recurring knee problem.

A couple of courses of anti-biotics; ciprofloxacin, amoxycillin and erythromycin, an alternative to penicillin, were present in the main medical kit left at base camp. Eye patches and amethocaine and chloramphenicol were provided for snow blindness.

Fortunately, apart from the occasional headache and an inflamed knee none of the medical supplies WAS brought in to play and the team were far too old to resort to any experimental use had they been tent-bound for weeks.

## **FOOD**

Always the subject of much debate, this time we pretty much got the food right, given the need to take an extra three days in case we were unable to fly out on our allotted date. In the end we were two days late in flying out due to poor weather. The place to shop is Carrs, a huge supermarket chain. There are outlets in Anchorage (#1805 1605 W Northern Lights Blvd) and also in Wassila, which lies on the road north from Anchorage to Talkeetna. Shuttle drivers will stop at Wassila but only for 15-20 minutes, so for a big order it is best to visit the main store on Northern Lights (very close to REI) before meeting the shuttle bus. There is a

price reduction at Carrs for those with Club Cards and for the sort of quantities required by most teams, it is well worth joining. The assistants will also pack all your food in to reasonably strong cardboard boxes. As an idea of what is on offer we took the following:

Muesli, Porridge, Crackers, Pilot Bread, Cookies, Honey, Peanut Butter, Jam, Gatorade, Coffee, Tinned Pink Salmon, Tinned Vegetable Chili, Tinned Tuna, Cheese, Lentils, Margarine (Gold), Dried Apricot, Dried Apple, Dried Figs, Dried Raisins, Chopped Dates, Gorp/Trail Mix, Hershey Bars, Twix, Milky Way, Snickers, Granola Bars, Kellogs Twists, Boiled Sweets, Chewing Gum, Packet Soups, Pesto, Jelly, Custard, Pancake Mix, Maple Syrup, Pasta, Rice, Instant Mash Potato, Herbs and Spices, Sugar, Dried Milk, Cooking Oil, Ketchup, Kitchen Tissue, Washing Liquid, Duracell Batteries (AA).  
(Bread, a few fresh apples and pure orange juice were taken for the first week

From the UK it is advisable to bring:

Tea bags (regular and Earl Grey)

Instant Custard

Dried Vegetables:

Virtually all of the food bought was good quality. The Gatorade was excellent and very much cheaper than in the UK. We also appreciated lots of biscuits on which it is possible to use an assortment of spreads. In this respect the Pilot Bread, an enormous circular cracker that could only be found in the US of A is excellent.

For quantities we used the established total of 1kg/person/day. Within this we loosely set amounts for each item in accordance with a list produced by that master of expedition organisation, Dave Wilkinson, marking individual products up or down (usually up) to taste.

#### ACCOUNTS

Income

MEF grant	740.00
BMC grant	1100.00
Personal	5272.41
Total	7112.41

Outgoings

Travel

Manchester to Anchorage Delta flight, three people	1710.00
Flight from Australia	800.00
Talkteetna Air Taxi, flights, accom. equip. hire etc.	1535.71
Anchorage to Talkeetna shuttle	265.00
Taxis and airport travel	126.80
Mobile phone hire	81.00
Satellite beacon	36.00

Fuel and sustenance

Hill food from Carrs and UK	370.00
Meals and sundry expenses	130.90
8 gas cylinders	24.00
3 gallons fuel	8.00

Equipment purchased for trip

1 <sup>st</sup> aid supplies	70.00
Insurance, four people	1150.00
Postage, phone laser copies etc.	105.00

Total	7112.41
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The Cathedral Mountains being to the west of the main mountain range do not see the aircraft on their daily flights to Denali. Communications with the outside world are therefore unlikely without a satellite phone or large radio set. The flight (over an hour) is also

considerably longer than to many of the popular areas in the main range and as such transport cost are higher.

#### **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

For their financial support without which the expedition would not have been possible, the climbers would like to thank the following:

The Mount Everest Foundation  
The British Mountaineering Council

For generous support with equipment:

Mike Kerry and Terra Nova for mountain tents  
Andy Denton and Catherine Gibson of Mountain Equipment for clothing.  
Hugh Banner and Paul Hadley of HB Climbing Equipment for axes and hardware.

For help in gleanng what little information we could on the area:

Fred Beckey, Christian Beckwith, John Middendorf, Paul Roderick, Roger Robinson.

#### **COPYING**

The expedition members agree that any or all of this report may be copied for the purpose of private research. Really interested parties can obtain more information by contacting any one of the members:

Brian Davison: 01524 34226  
Lindsay Griffin: 01248 602589  
Geoff Homby: 01773-831915  
Dave Wallis: Australia 61-402-655-117